

Engaging Teaching Assistants in marking and feedback

Context

In 2013, Red Marsh undertook an action research project with teachers exploring the use of Coaching as a means of offering peer to peer support. This was part of the Loyne Learning Alliance (LLA) programme of joint practice development (JPD) with the Loyne, Coppice and Mossgate focusing on the use of Lesson Study approach featured in the national primary strategy (DfES, 2008). Emerging from the LLA action research JPD process and the Russell et al (2013) research on maximising the impact of teaching assistants there was an interest in exploring features of the Lesson Study approach with Teaching Assistants (TAs). Two schools Red Marsh and the Loyne (see Briefing paper 9) undertook projects involving TAs in peer observation about aspects of the teaching and learning process.

Research questions and Purpose

1. How do TA3s involved in action research use marking and feedback plenary to support teachers in their planning for individual pupils?
2. How effective is the marking and feedback plenary in identifying pupils' learning and in shaping future learning activities?
3. What insights into individual pupil's learning can TA3s obtain by using the marking and feedback plenary sessions to ask pupils about their learning following a lesson?

Following the successful use of action research with teachers Red Marsh wished to develop TA confidence to adopt a more reflective approach and familiarise them with the action research approach as this would support future plans to become a research school. Achieving wider school improvement objectives are dependent on the active involvement of TA3 in helping to raise standards in teaching and learning and increasing their confidence to ask pupils questions about their learning. The project was designed to support TAs to share their experiences of marking and feedback plenary activities and gather suggestions for their professional development needs

Project outline

The project included a Pecha Kucha presentation to teachers regarding the parameters of the project including its focus, school improvement connections and details of their role in the process. There was an initial training for TAs about the action research process, an explanation of the action TAs needed to undertake and details of their participation in the research including confidentiality and informed consent.

- **Action:** TAs were given time to capture their annotations and to record the verbal interactions with a learner with whom they worked.
- **Research:** TAs participated in two group discussions in which they reflected on their experiences of annotating and providing verbal feedback. They also completed a questionnaire with statements about their interaction with teachers and other TAs, levels of confidence about annotation and feedback which were new responsibilities in the marking policy, and some open questions using the prompts of what works well and even better if...;

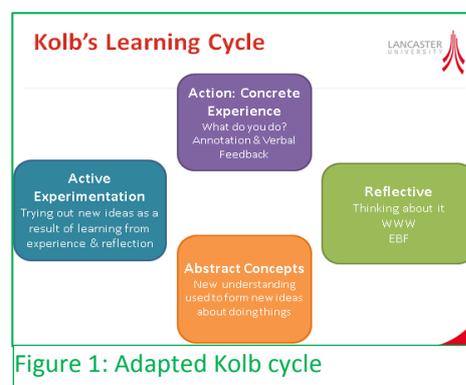


Figure 1: Adapted Kolb cycle

- **New Ideas:** Analysis of the initial questionnaire, annotations and records of verbal feedback and group discussions used to identify key findings and inform further action and recommendations;
- **Future Action:** dissemination of findings via briefing paper and discussion with senior leaders, teachers and teaching assistants. Interim feedback was provided to the Head teacher to support more immediate response, with a follow up session to share findings with the TA and to gather their response and to discuss how the cycle of action research might be extended.

Marking and feedback policy

In March 2014, a new marking and feedback policy was introduced, this was based on a collaborative approach to policy development that built on previous practices and aimed to provide an increased role for TA 3s in supporting teaching and learning. This approach is typical of a process indicator (Helsby and Saunders, 1993 see figure 3) the aim of the research project was to evaluate its effectiveness and generate ideas for further enhancement from the TA3 staff who are asked to contribute to teaching and assessment.

A summary of the policy is captured in figure 2 which highlights the purpose (**what**), the mechanism (**how**) and the reasons for the proposed action (**why**). When talking to TAs about their experience, this summary was used as a prompt to explore for example, the nature of their understanding of constructive feedback, or how they valued pupils work.

Rational and aims of policy

What How Why

- To provide **constructive feedback** to pupils to ensure they are **challenged to think about their learning** ensuring **pupil progress** is as rapid as possible
- To ensure pupils know that their **work is valued**
- To **support effective assessment** and **support effective moderation** of pupils work
- To ensure a **consistent approach to marking** and **consistent approach to feedback** across the primary, secondary and FE departments.

Figure 2: Marking and Feedback policy

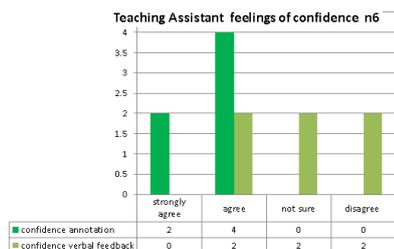
Engagement in the research process

Time and building a working relationship can help to address apprehension and concern – As this was the first experience of participating in research it was not surprising to find that some TAs were a little apprehensive about what they were required to do. There was an obvious commitment to *‘do the right thing’* despite this, there was a sense of being valued that was signalled by time being allocated to the project. The initial training provided an opportunity to ask questions and allowed the external researcher an opportunity to offer reassurance about issues of confidentiality, explain that there was a school commitment to learning from the research rather than using it to make judgements on performance and begin to gain an insight into the diversity of experience and working contexts. This initial discussion provided a valuable foundation for the second group interview where TAs appeared to be more relaxed and open to sharing their experiences.

Adapting data collection in response to feedback and use of familiar approaches – during the initial discussion with TAs and following review of the marking and feedback policy, two additional questions were included, firstly WWW ‘what works well’ and EBF ‘even better if’. Both directly emerged from the policy and were familiar to the TAs and relevant to their working practice. Given the diversity of working contexts which related to year group, the inclusion of these questions proved to be very useful.

Advantages of group interviews – the decision to undertake a group interview was influenced by a number of factors. Firstly, the practical logistics of releasing TAs from class for training and secondly, the anticipated support of a group discussion. For the initial meeting this was certainly beneficial, however, analysis of the individual written answers, and the logistics of ensuring all TAs had a chance to contribute to the second group discussion suggests that smaller group interviews either in pairs or triads may be more successful in gathering a richer data set. The smaller group would still provide the support but provide more opportunity for individuals to share examples (see Briefing Paper 9).

Views about new marking and feedback policy



When asked about how confident they felt annotating pupils' work and providing verbal feedback, TAs responses suggest that there is greater confidence in writing annotations, with a more mixed response to verbal feedback. The group interview and written feedback suggests that confidence is influenced by two factors, a learner's reaction to being asked to 'evaluate' their own work, and the challenge of finding quality time to discuss learners' achievements with their teacher.

Although TAs suggested that both annotation and verbal feedback processes would be enhanced by more time, in response to questionnaire statements there was general agreement that they often have the chance to talk about 'specific pupils' response to activities / lessons with the teacher and with other TAs. This difference is perhaps explained by the obvious commitment of the TAs to fulfil their responsibilities to a high standard and their interest in having the chance to play a more active role in teaching and learning. Four of the six TAs reported that they '*learned a lot about pupils' learning by working with, and talking to colleagues at Red Marsh*', and knew '*how the teachers they work with use the verbal feedback to help pupils' next steps*'.

Based on the responses to the statements it is recommended that school may wish to:

- allow TAs the opportunity to respond again to see if confidence levels have changed;
- invite teachers to comment on how they feel the policy is being implemented;
- explore with TAs and Teachers how the verbal feedback is actually being used to find out if there is a common understanding between staff who work together. The group interview suggests that teachers have different expectations and recording systems in place, this appeared to reflect the age and capabilities of the pupils, consequently comparison across the school would not seem appropriate.

Process indicators and ideas for future development

When asked to evaluate their experience of providing annotation and offering verbal feedback TAs generated a number of process and enabling indicators (Helsby and Saunders, 1993) which they believed were effective in the current system of annotation and verbal feedback. In addition, they generated ideas for future developments which include process and enabling indicators. In their written feedback TAs used age appropriate descriptors of children, pupils and students; as these would distinguish who made the comments, in the tables below the generic term learners is used.

Annotation

What works well	Even better if ...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Annotating as you go along so you don't forget the detail of what has happened</i>, it is possible that the gradual or precise nature of progress may be misrepresented if annotations completed later ➤ Keeping it brief and using the same marking system throughout school ➤ Post it notes or being able to record once ➤ Adapting the terminology used or starting with closed questions which can help to narrow 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ To have the time to give a more in-depth account about their work and what they have done well ➤ To have more time, so that you don't make silly mistakes due to rushing, an example of putting wrong activity for a pupil ➤ Allowing time at the end of the lesson (or some other dedicated time) to write up the annotations ➤ Use of stickers or visual symbols which can make use of the limited time

Time factors



Time often emerges as a factor that staff in school believe would enable tasks to be completed more fully or effectively, it was therefore not surprising that all TAs mentioned time as a factor. With so many competing demands on time this is likely to be a challenge. It is **recommended** that Senior Leaders consider the merits of piloting a system of staggered annotations over a period of time; this would enable TAs to focus on writing more in-depth annotations for individuals albeit at the expense of coverage. As one TA said: *'I don't feel there is*

sufficient time to record everything I would like to ...'. To address the coverage, building in some dedicated writing time at intervals throughout the term would clearly be useful. One TA commented: *'I believe writing the annotation is very beneficial for teachers and TAs, it gives a clear account of the [learners] achievements that can be use at a later time'*. Comments on verbal feedback (see below), suggest it may be more useful to organise dedicated time for teachers and TAs to discuss learners work, this would enable teachers to discuss annotations when they have been produced and gain a rich account from the TAs who have worked with individual learners. Another suggestion for a hybrid approach which may save time was offered in the group discussion from one TA who questioned whether *'you need group plenary as well as the individual plenary, it may differ between classes, but if they've given individual feedback then you've covered it and could save time if you didn't repeat it to the group'*. Another TA working in a different class identified the group plenary as the main opportunity to *'pass on information to the teacher, especially if they've reached a target'* in this situation a delay in sharing the information may result in unnecessary repetition. From analysis of the annotations it is evident that there are currently a diversity of approaches used by different TA, which the group interview suggest reflects different teachers expectations. These contrasts highlight the importance of local application of principles outlined within the marking and recording policy. Whilst this flexibility has its benefits it is recommended that when TAs move class teams or work across classes they should be given a clear induction from the class teacher about what is expected.

Verbal Feedback

What works well	Even better if ...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Giving the learners the chance to tell you what they have learnt, was mentioned by several TAs, one explained this was useful because you are <i>'able to see how much the [learner] understands in the lesson'</i>. ➤ Changing verbal language to suit learners individual needs ➤ Adapting the terminology used to increase relevance to the lesson ➤ Starting with closed questions which can help to narrow the focus and then asking for an example. ➤ <i>'To share ideas within the group'</i> so other staff are informed at the same time and can build on this when they next work with the learner ➤ <i>Talking with teachers about what went well in a lesson and what didn't work</i>, which provides a context for comments about individual learners achievements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ More time to talk to the teacher, but also to other staff, so that you can explain what and how you have been working with the learner ➤ This can be a difficult question to ask, especially if the learner perceives this as a criticism, <i>'they can get upset if they think we are questioning their work'</i> providing opportunities to share how others deal with this would be helpful ➤ Having more time to discuss feedback with learners <i>'allowing them time to answer'</i> ➤ Making greater use of switches and question strips when giving verbal feedback in a group situation ➤ Inclusion of GH – gestural help, or PH – physical help on displayed work to help communicate the nature of the achievement

Learning from our learners

When there was time, a number of TA described how being more involved in gathering verbal feedback from learners had been interesting and informative. *'It was interesting to see how [learner] spoke to me, [they] could tell me what [they] found hard, ... I found it fascinating, I would probably ask more detailed questions in the future, because you can learn more that way'*. The group interview also revealed other examples and highlighted the benefit of having time to reflect on their practice. It is possible that building in time for TAs to share what they are learning about how the learners they support learn would be a useful activity, especially if it was age related. To increase the opportunity for TAs to focus on learning consideration should be given to the work being facilitated by a teacher from a different key stage, or setting up a reciprocal arrangement with another school (for example, a local mainstream school, for whom Red Marsh offers TA observation placements or another LLA school interested in TA lesson study) – this would provide additional opportunities to share learning between schools and provide professional development for the teachers facilitating the discussion.

Providing accurate feedback

As noted above TAs felt more confident about annotating learners' work, however, in the group interview some felt that having the opportunity to discuss their verbal feedback was likely to increase the accuracy and reduce the risk of misinterpretation about what they had been observed. Accuracy and consistency are obviously important; the group interview highlighted a degree of uncertainty amongst the group about what constituted for example, a gestural prompt or a verbal prompt. There was an interesting discussion about how they would share these additional contextual descriptors, especially when giving verbal feedback in a plenary context, when the focus was often on highlighting achievement. To help generate greater consistency and confidence about when or how to note these contextual descriptors it may be helpful for teachers and TAs to watch some video evidence and discuss their observations.

Creative alternatives to WWW and EBF ...

Although the school policy recommends use of the WWW and EBF ... questions for supporting verbal feedback, it was acknowledged that for some learners other approaches may be more effective. For instance, asking about *'next steps'*. One TA explained how they *'work with [learners] who have greater need, so we use Think Boards where they would choose from some [pre-defined options] which are then used give them feedback'*. Another described how they offered a learner a set of possible answers, the learner would choose from the selection which would then be *'put on a switch so when we go back into whole group plenary they can play that and share with the teacher and the others in the group what they have [learned]'*. Others referred to the use of the IPAD for gathering feedback, or described how they collected feedback as part of the processes associated with gathering evidence for accreditation portfolios. There was a clear interest from the TAs in hearing about how their peers adapted how they gathered verbal feedback and providing future opportunities for future opportunities to share other creative approaches and reflect on their usefulness is likely to support the exchange of effective practices. Other questions suggested by the group included:

- What was the lesson about? What have you learned?
- Asking open questions which they could all answer but perhaps in different ways with different levels of detail
- Asking more able learners a question and then using their answer to bring in other learners. Who have you worked with? What did you enjoy about working with ...?

A note of caution – several TA suggested that *'you need to be aware it's not practical for some [learners] or maybe upsetting'* another explained that a *'nervous [learner] who gets worried if you ask or suggest something needs improving'* there was agreement further ideas for this situation would be welcome.

Multiple records and use of the annotations and verbal feedback

In the group interview it became evident that there was considerable diversity between classes about where TAs were asked to record their annotations. As already discussed an enabling aspect of the current approach is flexibility, however, it is recommended that teachers discuss the approaches or systems they use in their class, this would enable them to learn from one another and also allow them to reflect together on the effective approaches and reveal aspects of their process which could be streamlined. Ideas emerging from the TA discussion suggest that:

- sometimes there is duplication of effort, with annotations being recorded in more than one place;
- it is more challenging to annotate work when working in a group;
- when allocation is left till the end of the lesson it can be difficult to know what to prioritise, the annotation which becomes a 'rushed job' or the other task;
- TAs would find it useful to have time to look at plans.

Action Research Process

'It was really interesting – I found out things from others I didn't know'. This small scale action research has revealed TA 3 insights into what works well and how the marking and feedback processes of annotation and verbal feedback could be even better. The data collected from TAs suggests that:

- **Enabling dimension** of time is would most enhance their involvement in the process and that generating an agreed protocol for how to record verbal, gestural and physical prompts may lead to greater consistency;
- **Process dimensions** most valued are flexibility and discretion to adapt questions used to gather verbal feedback and the opportunity to discuss the lesson as well as individual learners achievements
- **Outcomes** from TA3 participation in the action research project include confirmation of confidence in the process, an opportunity to gain new ideas or practices and a list of suggestions for the future.

Enabling	Process	Outcome
Refers to dimensions which need:	Refers to aspects of:	Refers to:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ frameworks for action ➤ protocols ➤ space ➤ time ➤ people ➤ resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Action ➤ ways of doing things ➤ styles ➤ behaviours ➤ practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ goals ➤ product ➤ numbers ➤ impact ➤ changes ➤ new practices

Future research

Based on the insights gained from this cycle a number of recommendations have been suggested to build on the ideas suggested by TA3. There are two alternative options to extend understanding of the effectiveness of this initiative to involve TA3 in marking and reporting, firstly, discussing with teachers how they use the feedback, and secondly, observing the processes described. Each would provide complementary evidence of what from this study appears to include effective working practices.

References

- DCFS (2008) Improving practice and progression through Lesson Study Handbook for headteachers, leading teachers and subject leaders available at:
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- Helsby, G. and M. Saunders (1993) 'Taylorism, Tylorism and Performance Indicators: Defending the Indefensible?', *Educational Studies* 19(1): 55-77.
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- Russell, A., Webster, R. and Blatchford, P. (2013) *Maximising the impact of teaching assistants: Guidance for school leaders and teachers*, Routledge: Abingdon, Oxon



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